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Pandemic as a Challenge for Teaching Art in the Lower Grades of Elementary School in the Republic of Serbia

Extended summary

In the introductory part of the paper, and based on relevant scientific and professional literature in the field of art education, the importance of visual arts for the overall development and quality education of children is pointed out. The authors specifically emphasize the point of view according to which in the context of general education visual arts do not only have an affective/emotional aspect, but also a cognitive one (Eisner, 1968; 1976; 1992; 2002; Gardner, 1973; Southworth, 1982; Hadži Jovančić, 2012; and other authors). Although the teaching of art has never had the same status as other disciplines studied in schools, but holds a rather marginalized place (Bressler, 1998), during the pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2, many world organizations emphasized the importance of arts - presenting them as the most universal way to raise solidarity, express feelings, and awaken imagination. By supporting multiple ways of learning and knowing, by enabling children to communicate, present and express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, and by developing imagination, creativity, and flexible thinking, visual arts help children to nurture their natural curiosity and build their own understanding of the world (NAEA Position Statement on Early Childhood Art Education, 2021). Therefore, in this paper we look at the place and importance of visual arts in general education and examine whether and to what extent the status of the Art Culture subject in our schools has changed during the corona virus pandemic. With the intention of pointing out the position of the subject Art culture in the lower grades of elementary schools in the Republic of Serbia, we analyze the lesson fund dedicated to teaching this school subject in the plan of teaching and learning from the first to the fourth grades, which has not changed significantly since the introduction of the subject in the school curricula. The pandemic caused by the new corona vi-

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rus which began in early 2020 and is still ongoing and redefining the way we live, forced teachers to find new ways of organizing classes in accordance with the prescribed epidemiological measures.

The goal of the conducted research is to determine, by examining elementary school teachers' attitudes about their experience with teaching in the 2020/21 school year, to what extent they managed to adapt the teaching of fine arts to different circumstances, namely, to the introduced epidemiological measures. The research aim formulated in this way resulted in the research tasks, including determining the impact of the changes in the organization of teaching in primary schools due to the pandemic on the implementation of art classes, as well as examining teachers' attitudes about online teaching and the importance of full/regular number of art classes. The research instrument is a questionnaire that was delivered in electronic form to the respondents - teachers employed in elementary schools in the Republic of Serbia before the end of the 2020/21 school year. The questionnaire contains twelve questions that are designed to answer the research tasks as much as possible. The questionnaire was given to 138 teachers (N=138) from different cities and towns of the Republic of Serbia, and the data collected during the research were processed quantitatively and qualitatively.

The results of the research indicate that in the school year 2020/21 teachers had to modify and adapt their teaching significantly. The conclusion is that teachers perceive and emphasize the unfavorable impact of the changes – the reduced number and duration of art lessons, the impossibility of working in pairs or groups, as well as the introduction of online teaching - on the development of children's art creativity. The majority of the respondents observed the epidemiological measures, which meant that a certain distance among pupils was kept in the classes, though it can be concluded from their answers that they believe that in this way the children were deprived of an important segment of work in art classes. The teachers tried in different ways to cope with the measure of shortened lesson duration, but it is clear that the time limit was a big problem for them in teaching art classes. Also, by examining the elementary school teachers' views on the advantages and disadvantages of online forms of art education, it was found that in most cases, the greatest advantage according to the respondents is that students are not limited in terms of time to complete their art assignment at home and that they have more opportunities to study visual stimuli. Nevertheless, the largest number of the respondents expressed their views on the shortcomings of online art classes. The teachers mostly pointed out the weak motivation and interest of pupils when they do art assignments independently at home, the lack of exchange of ideas among pupils, as well as conversations between teachers and pupils, the inability to work in a group, too much help from parents in doing the assignments, etc. The results clearly indicate that teachers - despite the general social climate and the education system in which the most important thing is to make pupils literate - are aware of the importance of visual arts in education for the balanced development of every child. The conclusions confirm the gap that exists between the great role that visual arts play in the process of growing up and the marginal position of the Fine Arts subject in the education system, which has come to the fore even more with the pandemic.

The potential future changes of the education system should be instigated by the elementary school teachers themselves who would be supported by the curriculum developers. Only

this kind of support will provide the children with the necessary space and time for something that is deeply rooted in their nature.

Keywords: art in education, Art instruction, pandemic, online teaching

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